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"In a Word, a World": C.D. Wright's Apology

A Review of The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All *by C.D. Wright*

At least among poets, universal love is a habit of mind on shaky footing in our age of irony. As a doctrine it may seem too compromised in its history; as a disposition it may seem too easy in theory, too hard in practice, or too withdrawn from callous discourses of public life. As Nathaniel Tarn wrote in *The Beautiful Contradictions,* "The problem is to love all without loss of edge."

When it comes to the art of loving all without loss of edge, few have sought to "enlarge the circle" with the same determination as C.D. Wright. Words root her impassioned abandon. "I love them all," exhorts her latest book. This isn't the first time Wright has insisted on her unqualified love of language. In *Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil* (2005), she wrote, "I believe the word was made good from the start; it remains so to this second." Only now, Wright gives her insistence full vent, attesting her love for every word of every language, sociolect, and idiolect, and for every "clutch" of words comprising every jargon, seduction, and revolt. Don't suppose this is superficial verbal populism. Her belief has theological and philosophical underpinnings: "I am of the unaccredited school that believes animals did not exist until Adam assigned them names." And the edges of this belief sharpen into poetry with the grammar of a mathematical proof: "*Horse*, then, unhorses what is not horse."

I should be writing in the past tense, since Wright died unexpectedly of thrombosis on January 12, 2016, at the age of 67, after a flight from Chile to Providence, Rhode Island, where she taught at Brown University for over thirty years. A week earlier, she published the book I quote above, giving it a demanding omnibus title fit for an eighteenth-century novel or a Fiona Apple record: *The Poet, the Lion, Talking Pictures, El Farolito, a Wedding in St. Roch, the Big Box Store, the Warp in the Mirror, Spring, Midnights, Fire & All* (henceforth *The Poet*). In the weeks after her death, moving obituaries and remembrances flowed in from her legion of friends, students, and admirers, and the impressive contours of her career came into view. Her youthful involvement with the poet Frank Stanford in Arkansas, where

she was born, has an increasingly legendary patina, as does her long stewardship of Lost Roads Press's under-celebrated catalogue and her decades of writing and teaching at Brown alongside intimates and friends like her husband, Forrest Gander; Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop; Robert Creeley; and Thalia Field. Distinguished fellowships eventually rolled in (particularly a MacArthur in 2004), belatedly acknowledging the already robust impact of her work. She published over a dozen books, ranging from poetry to prosimetrical essays and artists' collaborations, from her Lost Roads debut *Room Rented By A Single Woman* (1977) to *Deepstep Come Shining* (1998), and from *One Big Self: Prisoners of Louisiana* (2003, with photographs by Deborah Luster) to *Rising, Falling, Hovering* (2008), winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize.

Fifteen years ago, I joined the flock of admiring undergraduates at Wright's readings in Providence, hoping to catch a fleck of the cool she cast all around her whenever she spoke. But this sort of reminiscence only crowds the frame of her achievement, which is on full display in *The Poet*. It is not her last book (Copper Canyon released *Shallcross* in April), but it does serve as a *summa lyrica*: an apology, warrant, and defense for poetry, and the statement of a poetics that manifests her edgy iconoclasm and her patient ecumenicalism in equal measure. Wright's apology builds from her elevation of a humble and socially progressive art of Adamic nomination. It belongs on the reading list of anyone who hopes for or despairs over the future of poetry, and anyone who suspects they might have undersold the art.

Loving all words and choosing them rightly could be regarded as a banal point of emphasis for a poetics—a creed in no need of Sisyphean repetition. But Sisyphean repetition is exactly what Wright insists upon in the seven interspersed sections of *The Poet* that each repeat the title "In a Word, a World." "A word," she writes, "is chosen and put into position, for particular effect. It is tantamount to hauling a big rock, carrying it a great distance, and setting it down." Draining the absurdity from Sisyphus's plight, she valorizes his labor.

Wright calls her school of logophilia "unaccredited" because it borders on a Cratylist faith—a faith that language inhabits and imitates the world. That is, against the findings of most of modern linguistics, Wright holds that language's phenomenal and material aspects reinforce its meaning-generating capacities. Among the words she loved best of all was the big one, *world*, the one closest orthographically to the name of her linguistic passion. On *world*, she bestows an abundance of epithets: "the mother word, word of words":

> And so, *world*, Middle English, from the Old English *weorold*, also appearing as *warld*, *wardle*, *werld*, *worlde*, *worold*, *woruld*, *wurld*, *wuruld*—that's the word for me. Such surround-sound amplitude, such magnetic force. It cannot be got outside of. One must hew to its basic requirements or succumb to its anguish. "World. World. O world!" Made of everything and nothing.

To Wright it was no arbitrary accident that *words* and *worlds* discarded all vowels besides *O*, which she called the best of the twenty-six letters, and with which she cries out in one of her many apostrophes: "O world!" But apostrophes for Wright are not showy forms of self-display, pointing at absences only to make the poet's presence known, as they most often are in the history of poetry. Rather, they are ways of proclaiming the poet's sense of care. Words worry over the world. "The world at risk is the meaning of words. The felicitously manifold meanings of words." Correspondingly, Wright risks mangling meanings past recognition and crying out to impassive objects in order to join her love of word to her love of world.

To be sure, Wright's faith occasionally wavers, as it does in her poem "More Blues and the Abstract Truth":

> And how does a body break
> bread with the word when the word
> has broken.

In her hard-won, jammed-up beliefs, poetry might well be communion with the word, but the word has to uphold its end of the bargain, something it has trouble doing in the press of technobabble, political dissimulation, and the miscarriage of ecological care, which Wright's poems increasingly tended to diagnose.

Cratylist love is not the only warrant Wright issues to poetry. To the contrary, her warrants proliferate, as if in inverse proportion to the warrantless wiretaps of overzealous enforcement agencies defining political life after 9/11. (Wright critiqued this state of affairs in her most committed poem, *Rising, Falling, Hovering*, and in *The Poet* she revisits what she was thinking during its composition.) Throughout much of the book, *The Poet* therefore joins the tradition of the poetic apology, drawing stealthily from the force that Sidney, Shelley, and others have granted that genre.

The Poet offers its most sustained defense in the mirthfully serious essay "Concerning Why Poetry Offers a Better Deal Than the World's Biggest Retailer." What does it mean to subscribe to an art of indirection, doubt, and isolation under conditions epitomized by the cultural desert of the big-box store (or what Wright calls the distractions of the "shiny cart" rolling down "Action Alley")? For twenty-five years, orthodox diagnosticians have named this the cultural logic of *late* capitalism, but Wright offers a drearier diagnosis in the form of a hammy koan: "What if, one poet asks another, in a flash of foreboding, what if this is just *middle* capitalism?" Here, the labyrinth is larger and deadlier than many suppose, and one of poetry's handicaps in this labyrinth—unlike its prime competitor, Walmart—is its inability to "create the environment" for its reception. This is not the same as elite handwringing over the waning fortunes of poetry in public life (a story Wright acknowledges with appropriate skepticism). Wright is more interested in how poets come to the art anyway.

Here she expresses an autobiographical solidarity with the cosmopolitanism of the underclasses—not those who have fallen from poetry, but those who may have been deprived of the forms of social flourishing conducive to poetry. As she puts it: "Born in Somalia. Born in the Autonomous Region. Born in Arkansas, raised by the grace of God to be a razorback. Born to be a greeter at Walmart." The poet and translator Clayton Eshleman once told me, "by all rights I should have been an Indianapolis car salesman." Here, she might have endorsed the work of Mark Nowak or Craig Santos Perez—poets who are especially adept at creating enlarged conditions of reception for poetry as a mechanism of social empowerment. I'm not convinced she effectively inhabits their radical stance, though she verges on it.

Having "by the grace of God" averted her eyes from the face of Sam Walton's medusa, Wright surveys common laments for poetry by those who have been petrified by his gaze: "Blame it on democracy"; "Distraction trumps concentration"; "A common charge is that poetry is an internal affair"; "Entrepreneurs are not interested"; "the wiring and then the wireless changed everything." She also surveys the surveys (by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation). Some of these she gamely puts to rest with pithy observations. Elsewhere she lends her conviction to refrains that seem hopelessly inadequate, even if true enough: "I say, teach your kids to read poetry." She surveys her students and contemporaries, documenting more or less interesting and urgent answers. Ben Lerner, for example, writes: "Maybe a culture that attends to poetry is in a better position to unfix the language from the

ruinous project of concealing the forms we live by." Joining this company, the ground is clear enough for her to declare her own warrants. She does not deliver them with the futurian optimism of a manifesto but in the declarative syntax of a constitution:

> That the poems we snatch from the language must bear the habit of our thinking.
>
> That their arrangement strengthens the authority on which each separate line is laid.
>
> That they extend the line into perpetuity.
>
> That they enlarge circle.
>
> […]
>
> That they rectify the names.
>
> That they draw not conclusions but further qualify doubt.
>
> That they avail themselves of the shrapnel of everything: the disappearance of cork trees and coral, the destroyed center of Ramadi, the shape of buildings to come, the pearness of pears.
>
> That they keep a big-box sense of humor at the ready (like an ax in a glass case).
>
> That they bring the ship nearer to its longing.
>
> That they resensitize the surface of things.

In the conviction that poetry rectifies names, I hear the distillation of Wright's overwhelming faith in Adam's scene of nomination—in the creation and restoration of the word. In the rest of her gnomic declaration, I can hear the poetic formulae of many modern poets and theorists whom Wright probably read assiduously, and one or two I suspect she did not: Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Octavio Paz, William Carlos Williams, Raúl Zurita, Brenda Hillman, Juliana Spahr. Others will hear others, and this is all to the good. Wright

conjures a scenario for poetry borrowed from anti-GMO (and anti-Walmart) food-security discourses: "It could be that an international vault will have to be established for poetry, to ensure the renewal of the greatest variety of voices." The various echoes her readers will hear are arrayed on some small shelf in the vault, making their quiet cases.

Wright calls *The Poet* a book of "prosimetrical essays" (from *prosimetrum*, the form of poetic art that combines prose and verse). In it she borrows or builds from prefaces she wrote for some other great prosimetrical works of the past century, including Williams's *Spring and All* and Zurita's *Purgatorio*. Alongside them, she champions the work of peers with marvelous economy, including Jane Miller, Jenny Boully, John Taggart, and Robert Creeley (the "lion" in the book's title). But it would be a mistake to say that these groupings constitute the map of Wright's influences, her coterie, or her school. For most of her career, Wright was not a partisan of any school. Her references ranged, her enthusiasms were plural. You will not find her falling into the side-taking animus that has so often structured the history of U.S. poetry at least since the anthology wars of the 1960s. But Wright respected the need for such antagonisms. "I think that antithetical poetries can and should coexist without crippling one another," she wrote in *Cooling Time*. "They not only serve to define their other to a much more exacting degree than would be possible in the absence of the one or the other; they insure the persistence of heterogeneous […] constituencies. Although I am not equal to it, I appreciate the fray." Before the vault, the *agon* ensured poetry's survival.

However, in *The Poet*, Wright now finds "the fray" to be self-defeating. In art critic Peter Schjeldahl's claim that "painting survives on a case-by-case basis" whose rare successes escape "the verdict of history," she saw a bleak future for poetry. "There is a communal component to poetry as it is currently practiced, advanced, and transmitted which makes me think the case-by-case trial would turn poetry into a very destructive effort, poet against poet, eye against eye; soon everybody blind." Wright sought a different kind of community, secured by the authority of its love of language, its restless interest in "enlarging the circle," its rectification of the names of the human (and nonhuman) dead, its willingness to risk meaning in order to awaken sensitivity, and its mirthful attempt to write its way out of the big-box store. Which is to say, its attempt to write its way into a world whose first principles are the words with and for which she expresses an omnivorous love. For Wright, poetry "brings forth possibility, 'the greatest good.'"